STRANGLEHOLD

John Woo's Epic For PS3, Xbox 360, And PC Unveiled

SEVEN FOR SQUARE ENIX IN 2006

We Explore Kingdom Hearts II And Six Other New Games From The RPG Masters

GAMEINFORMER®

COMPUTER & VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE

ISSUE 155 MARCH 2006

In a world beneath the **ocean** a **paradise** was born then **humanity's** search for **perfection** became an **obsession**

WORLD EXCLUSIVE

BIOSHOCK

A smart & twisted first-person adventure from the creators of System Shock 2

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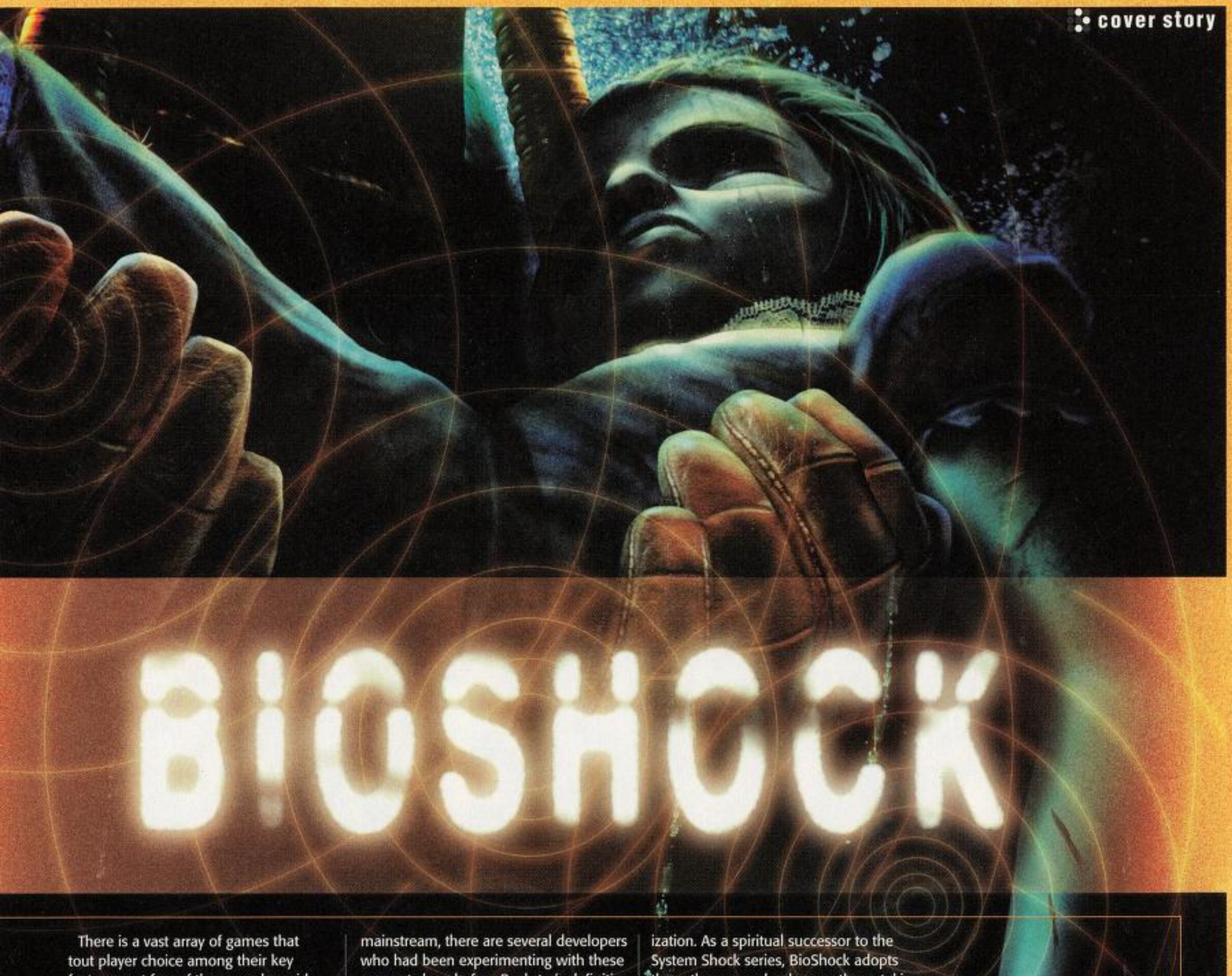
XBOX 360 | PC

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/ADVENTURE
> **PUBLISHER** 2K GAMES
> **DEVELOPER** IRRATIONAL GAMES
> **RELEASE** 2007

“Every man builds his world in his own image. He has the power to choose, but no power to escape the necessity of choice.”

–Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*

As you huddle in the shadow of a crumbling statue of Atlas, you hear only two sounds. One is the slow trickle of the ocean seeping through the walls and ceiling as it gradually reclaims the underwater city. The other is the unmistakable mechanical footsteps of a Protector. As you peer out from cover, you see the robotic golem lumber through the ornate door; one massive hand gripping a chain gun, and the other holding the hand of a small girl – 12 years old at the most. As the pair enters the room, the child breaks off from her companion and kneels beside one of the mutated corpses littering the floor. Dressed in a ragged dress and covered in scratches, the girl takes out a syringe and plunges it into the lifeless body, extracting a precious genetic fluid from the fallen warrior. After a few moments, she removes the crude instrument and brings it to her lips, and you take out your gun. As she drinks, your finger hesitates on the trigger as you contemplate the choice in front of you. Yes, by spilling the blood of this girl, your own life may be saved – but is it even worth saving when it comes at the expense of your humanity? If you murder a child in cold blood, would you be any different from the disfigured remnants of men at your feet? Sure you would. You'd be breathing, and assuming you survive the Protector's inevitable onslaught, you'd have a better chance of keeping it that way. So, what are you waiting for?



There is a vast array of games that tout player choice among their key features, yet few of them can be said to make players face tough decisions. Choosing to shoot down a helicopter with a bazooka instead of a sniper rifle is certainly entertaining, but we rarely see virtual environments that accommodate and adapt to an expanded range of possibilities. The very concept poses an interesting challenge to developers: How do you craft a game that not only allows for multiple approaches to every situation, but also one that gives the players' decisions a resonance within the world? The answer conceived by Irrational Games is BioShock.

There was a time when phrases like "emergent gameplay" and "open world" weren't even part of the gaming lexicon. When you beat level 1-1, you proceeded to level 1-2; you expected no say in the matter. Even though the release of Grand Theft Auto III in 2001 is credited with transforming this approach in the gaming mainstream, there are several developers who had been experimenting with these concepts long before Rockstar's definitive title, and Irrational Games was among the first.

Recently in the spotlight for the critically-acclaimed PC titles SWAT 4 and Freedom Force vs. The Third Reich, Irrational has a tradition of creating highly respected games, as does its staff. Irrational's president (and BioShock's creative director) Ken Levine was at Looking Glass Studios when it produced the first System Shock, as well the stealth/action innovator Thief. In 1999, Irrational released the cult classic System Shock 2, a follow-up to the defunct developer Looking Glass Studios' original System Shock. As a first-person hybrid of the action, adventure, and RPG genres, System Shock 2 featured complex (and sometimes daunting) mechanics set against a chilling and compelling sci-fi backdrop, with the core gameplay centered on player choice and customization. As a spiritual successor to the System Shock series, BioShock adopts these themes and enhances them, taking the necessary steps forward to evolve the genre as it makes the transition to the next generation.

"We have beautiful graphics – a lot of next-gen games have beautiful graphics. The next generation is really about choice, and emergence, and continuous experience. It's not about individual levels," Ken Levine tells us. "In the same way GTA first brought the notion to the consoles, the next generation is about expanding that and making it richer."

Irrational's strategy for this evolution is comprised of several components, and the team sees immersing players in the world and its fiction as the first step in making them care about their choices. As such, BioShock's hooks are guaranteed to grab you early and never let go.

The game opens in the early 1960s as you find yourself flailing underwater,

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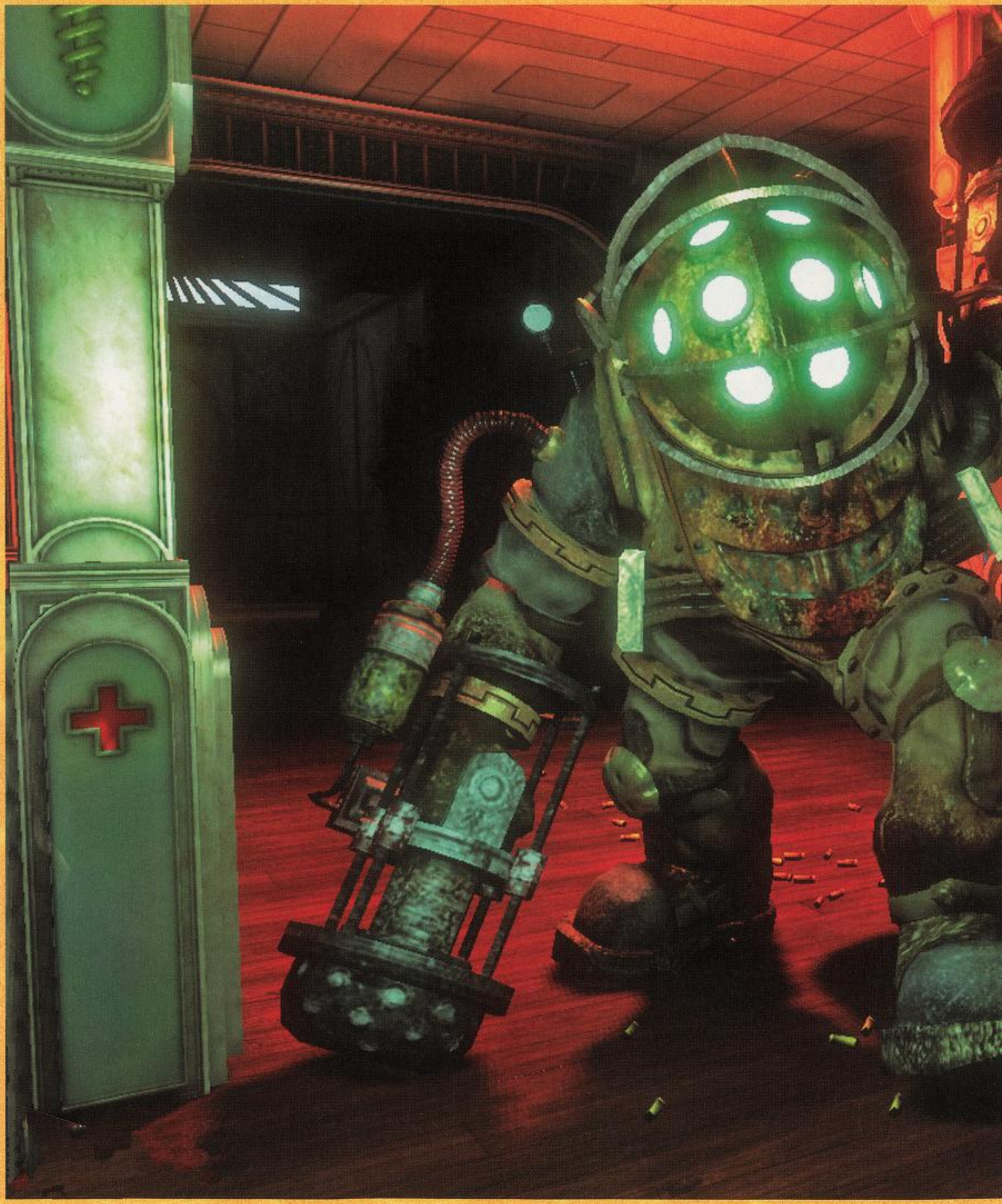

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floating in the ocean as debris falls from above. Bobbing to the surface, you are surrounded by bodies and the wreckage of an airplane. There is no opening cutscene chronicling the circumstances of the apparent crash, leaving you to improvise on the spot. "Did you wake up this morning to a cutscene telling you how you got to where you are in your life? No, you just got up and brushed your teeth," jokes Levine.

With survival as your immediate goal, you scan the horizon for signs of land, and you notice something conspicuously out of place. In the middle of the ocean, leagues from civilization, is a single lighthouse jutting up from the water. Swimming closer to investigate, you reach the mysterious structure and scale the stairs inside only to find another oddity: a bathosphere occupied by a dead body. With nowhere to go but down, you remove the unfortunate passenger and climb into the diving apparatus, descending into the unknown below.

As you near the ocean floor, you see the lights and structures of an entire city rising to meet you. When the bathosphere finally stops, you step out into a crumbling world that seems trapped in time. The once-elegant decor has been ravaged by age and combat, as well as the water pouring steadily through the cracks in the glass walls. Welcome to Rapture.

Though it is currently a ruined shadow of its former self, Rapture was once a veritable utopia, though not in classical sense. It was not a place where everyone held hands and pranced around in circles; it was an elite intellectual paradise.

"I've always been interested in Ayn Rand and her crazy utopian view of this extreme capitalism, and what that could bring about if it were focused – celebration of the individual versus society," explains Levine. This exaltation of mankind goes so far as to defy the gods by building an entire civilization underwater. "Their attitude, no matter what the challenge, is 'we can beat it.' And they almost do."

Devised by a Soviet expatriate named Andrew Ryan in 1946, Rapture was intended to provide an opportunity for the best and brightest in the world – artists, scientists, athletes – to excel on their own extraordinary merits rather than having their energy diverted to the huddled masses. Of course, as the community's founder, Ryan had a definite financial advantage over the other inhabitants, but something happened that threw Rapture's balanced economy into disastrous territory.

Two scientists researching the bottom-dwelling creatures of the ocean made a revolutionary discovery: a sea slug. This unique species of slug is special though, because for every cell it consumes and destroys, it secretes a fluid containing raw stem cells. In just a short time this substance, dubbed Adam, became the dominant currency of Rapture. "You want to be smarter? Faster? Not die from the cancer in your body?" asks Levine. "Adam is the solution." With its ability to heal injuries and grant improved physical and mental performance, things like food and money were pushed to the

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■ **Just because this particular Protector isn't equipped with guns doesn't mean that it won't be a deadly foe**

■ The idealistic surroundings and grim reality are constantly at odds

■ The war between Ryan and Fontaine has left Rapture littered with items useful in combat

■ If the fighting doesn't destroy Ryan's utopia, the ocean will

■ Rooms like these are where citizens would genetically alter themselves, sometimes beyond recognition, in order to survive

"The next generation is really about choice, and emergence, and continous experience. It's not about individual levels."

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periphery. The only problem was that Andrew Ryan didn't control Adam – a young opportunist named Fontaine did. A full-scale genetic arms race broke out in Rapture between its two most powerful men, with this valuable resource at the center.

Jump forward to the game's opening scenes. Years have passed since the war, and Rapture is no longer what it used to be, and neither are its citizens. The utopian vision, as well as the human one, has fallen apart. "You learn that Ryan has won the war against Fontaine, but at the cost not only of this beautiful utopia, but also the humanity of everyone in it," Levine says. In the chaos of the combat, soldiers and civilians alike discovered another use for Adam: self-modification. Integrating technology into themselves and enhancing their abilities beyond natural boundaries, becoming a genetic abomination was the only way to stay strong enough to withstand the escalating violence.

As you explore Rapture, these are the creatures you will encounter as friends and foes. They may have once been pinnacles of mankind's achievements, but now they are barely shells of their former selves. "They had to give up their humanity, and they're aware of that," describes Levine. "Some of them wear masks over their faces because they know how they look, but they had to do it to survive." Desperate and downtrodden as they may be, the doomed residents of Rapture actually provide many of dynamic opportunities for players to exercise choice in BioShock. This is due to an intricate system of NPC behavior that the team is calling the "AI ecology."

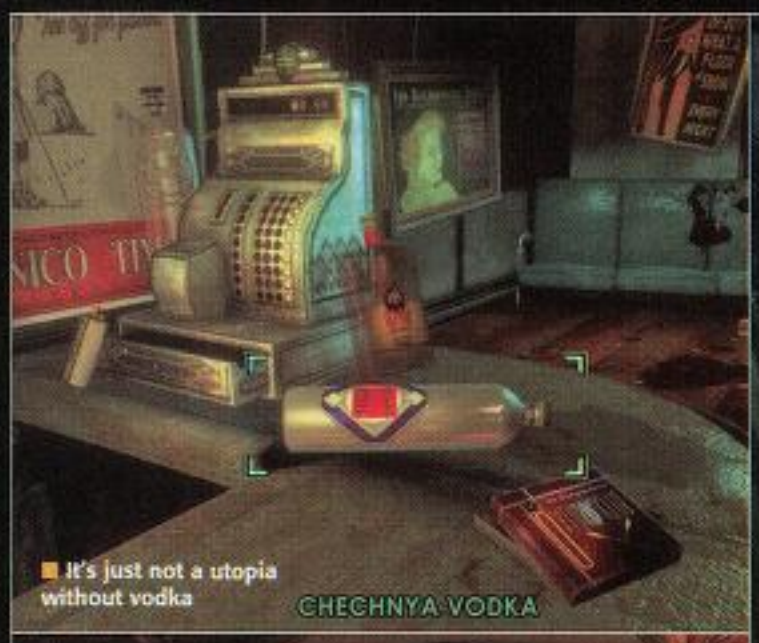
In nature, animal interactions are governed by some basic rules, but it all essentially boils down to hunter versus hunted. Some species are aggressive, some are passive, and some use tricks to deter would-be predators. Irrational has taken these concepts found in natural ecology and applied them to BioShock's entire population. "That's what makes BioShock different from a game like Doom, where you see monsters ahead of you, then step over an invisible trigger, and they charge you," insists Levine. "There's only so much you can do with an AI that only knows how to take cover and flank. We want to build a relationship between AIs." This relationship is heavily dependent on how the environment is populated and the various creatures' roles within that world. For instance, some of your primary foes in BioShock are called Aggressors, deformed soldiers in Ryan's genetically modified army. These tormented beings patrol the corridors, attacking the player as well as the scattered remnants of Fontaine's forces. Irate and brutal as Aggressors may be, they will generally ignore the one thing keeping Rapture alive: the Gatherers.

During the war, all natural sources of Adam were destroyed. Unfortunately, people's biology had become so dependent on it by that point that they couldn't live without it. Ryan found an unsettling solution, however. The only way to obtain a viable supply of Adam was by extracting it from the bodies of the dead and processing it into a reusable form. To accomplish this, Ryan modified children to become Gatherers – living Adam containers who must locate and drink the substance on corpses so their bodies can transmute it into a harvestable form.

If Gatherers are full of Adam, and Adam is the most valuable thing in Rapture, it may seem surprising that these children are able to survive the harsh, unforgiving halls of the former utopia. The main reason why Aggressors, and essentially everything else, avoid interfering with the Gatherers' duty is that each one is accompanied by a Protector. Mute, loyal, and equipped with high-end weaponry, the Protectors are the most dangerous foes in Rapture. Lead designer Paul Hellquist observes: "Once you mess with them, you find out why no one messes with them."

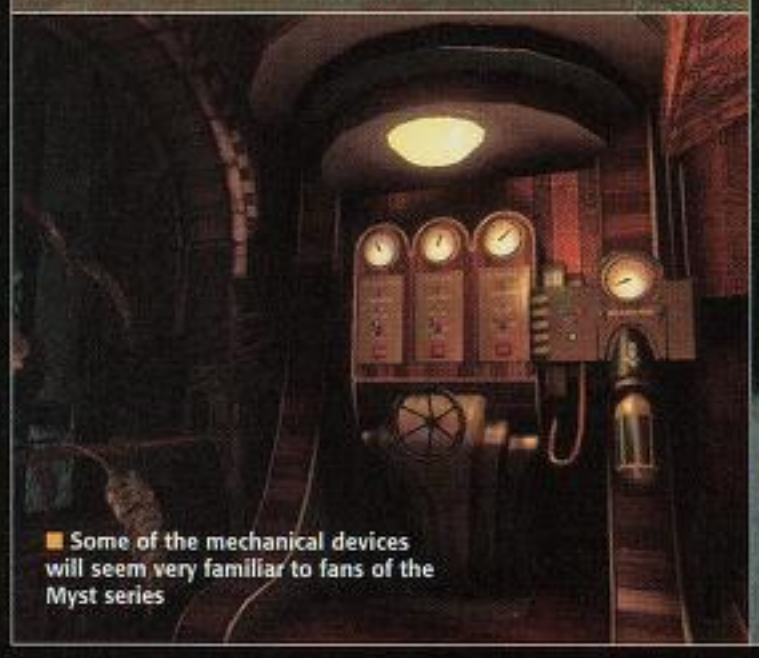
Of course, that isn't to say that you can't choose to kill a Gatherer. It requires a certain investment of resources (the ensuing Protector battle will cost health and ammo), but the financial rewards are immense. Then again, it isn't like you would be shooting holes in a slobbering demon wielding a rocket launcher. Gatherers are unarmed non-combatants, and they don't bother you if you don't bother them. "Too often in games, there is violence without

■ All of the screens on these pages are taken from the Xbox 360 build, which will hit shelves slightly before the PC version



■ It's just not a utopia without vodka

CHECHNYA VODKA



■ Some of the mechanical devices will seem very familiar to fans of the Myst series

■ In motion, the water effects are truly amazing. In fact, Irrational has someone on staff whose sole job is to handle water effects – everything from the fountains and ripples to the distortion of the fish beneath the surface

repercussion. We want to hit players in the gut with this," admits Levine. "The immediate gameplay repercussion is the fact that you have to face off with a Protector. But then there are the sort of in-your-stomach repercussions, where you think 'Ugh...do I really want to do this?' We don't make a judgment on that. We're creating a world for you to be in. What you do is up to you, and you have to live with your choices."

Complicating the moral situation even more is that fact that you won't necessarily have to fight the Protector; there are ways to get off scot-free by manipulating the web of Rapture's relationships. "The core of the gameplay is your ability to impact this world," Levine reveals. "There are ways to use the Aggressors to fight the Protectors, and vice versa." These unique abilities are unlocked by the player undergoing the same kind of mutations that the residents had to endure. By spending Adam, you can obtain personal upgrades called Plasmids which can grant you various advantages in the world around you. "There's a wide range, from really out-there things to stat-based skills you've seen before," explains Hellquist. "But you won't open a menu and say, 'Oh, look, my agility is at 22!' You'll notice it in the gameplay. 'Wow, I'm running faster now that I've got this Plasmid.'"

While some of these upgrades may be statistic-based, the majority of them actually give you new ways to use your weapons and abilities, enhancing the ways to can interact with the world around you. Mind Pull gives you telekinetic powers, allowing you to psionically manipulate the hundreds of objects lying around Rapture at will; Inanimate Instinct gives your weapons limited sentience, which in turn gives your ammunition heat-seeking capabilities; and Brilliant Inventor takes advantage of BioShock's crafting system by allowing you to create entirely new weapons and items.

Plasmids can also expand your options for steering the AI ecology in your favor. As previously mentioned, Aggressors are conditioned to avoid confronting Gatherers. With the ability Gatherer Cry, you can fool everything in the area into thinking you are one of the young harvesters, ensuring your safety. Even better, if there is a Protector nearby, Gatherer Cry will make it believe that you are its diminutive ward, causing it defend you to the death.

These upgrades represent another instance where your choices will drastically alter your experience with BioShock. If more traditional FPS action is your style, you'll still find a deep and engaging adventure by specializing in the Weaponry tree, though Hellquist cautions that "there are lots of ways you can manipulate the world that weapons guys will just have to blast through." For example, players focusing solely in weapons will have to take up a modified pistol or grenade launcher if they want to blast a Gatherer and survive the Protector's fury. But if you choose another path, you may find yourself with the Aggressor Irritant ability, which makes your enemy hostile toward the next thing it sees. If you strategically use this on Aggressors, you can get them to launch an extremely unwise assault on a passing Gatherer, understandably upsetting the Protector. As those two are engaged in combat, you are left with an opportunity to take a consequence-free shot at the Gatherer (assuming you can do that and still sleep at night), loot the body, and escape before the Protector realizes it's been had.

Taking advantage of Rapture's citizens isn't limited to living foes, either. By progressing down the Engineering tree, you gain hacking skills as well as a handy power called Security Beacon. Scattered throughout the wreckage of Rapture are many security cameras, used by Ryan to identify hostile intruders and mobilize security drones (flying outboard motors with mounted guns). Naturally, these cameras are placed in sensitive areas that often have additional sentries posted. By using Security Beacon on an Aggressor, the camera loses the ability to perceive it as an ally and proceeds to send in the drones. As the Aggressor

The Walls Are Talking

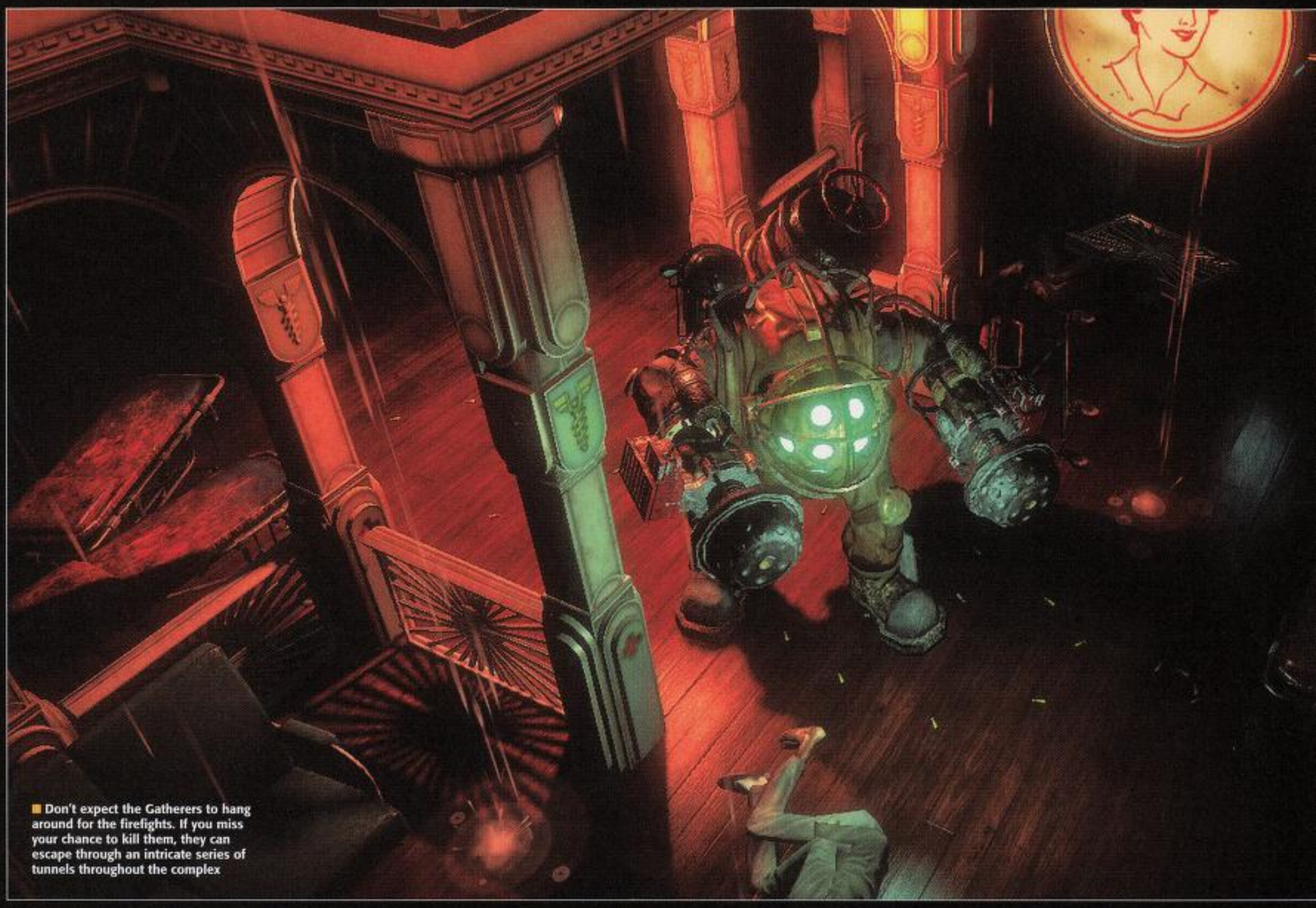
When trying to formulate a cohesive visual motif for BioShock, the artistic team used the Art Deco movement as inspiration. When Rapture was supposedly constructed in 1946, Art Deco was one of the more forward-thinking styles of the era, making use of marble, wood, and stainless steel. The goal is to have the architecture itself convey a sense of idealism and reality clashing, and to illustrate the losing battle between the man-made structure and the endless water surrounding it. Or, as Levine succintly puts it: "The ocean doesn't want an Art Deco utopia in it. The ocean wants to be the ocean."

is being attacked from above, you have a good chance of slipping by undetected in the commotion. "Games just don't let you mess with them anymore," laments Hellquist. "We're giving you the ability to get in there and muck up the works."

The first concern that comes to mind with such an involved skill system is upgrade remorse. Most gamers have felt the crushing humiliation of spending all of their points on a new shiny power, only to have a newer, shinier power become available moments later. "Once you allow modification, you never find something better than what you're already working on," laughs Hellquist. Irrational is ensuring this in BioShock with the implementation of Plasmid machines. These single-use stations are set up all over Rapture, giving players a chance to try out different skill builds. Because they are one-shot opportunities, it allows you to play around without worrying about endless optimization. "This isn't a tweaky-numbers-stat-thing. When you go the Plasmid machines, you can basically rebuild your loadout from scratch. There's no lost investment," Levine assures us. If you don't like your psionic powers, you can ditch every ability in the tree and start over with Engineering, or mix and match a little from every category. It's still focused on player choice, but allows you some flexibility if you end up regretting your choices down the road.

Since any given encounter in the game can play out in a multitude of ways, one has to wonder how the development team can exercise control over the player's actions. The short and simple answer is that the team doesn't expect to control the player. Of course, Irrational knows approximately where you

The Protectors won't be quite so frightening when you've manipulated them into killing Aggressors to buy yourself a little time



■ Don't expect the Gatherers to hang around for the firefights. If you miss your chance to kill them, they can escape through an intricate series of tunnels throughout the complex

should be on the resource curve at any given time, but the goal is not to deliver a linear, regulated experience. "We want to make a game where a walkthrough is useless. That's where games need to go," Levine insists. 'I'd much rather play a game where I can say 'Oh, I had this experience," and someone else can say 'I did that part in a totally different way.' It's about thinking of different opportunities for every play style, and making it interesting for each of them."

But at what point does this freedom cease to be liberating and become daunting? It's easy to think that the many systems and mechanics in BioShock could quickly become too complicated for their own good. After all, by Levine's own admission, they got a bit carried away with System Shock 2. "System Shock 2 was too hard...too pointy-headed, basically. We said, 'Here's all the complexity of the game right in the first scene. Suck it up.'" While this approach still gathered a remarkably devoted following for that title, Irrational has developed an innovative guided training tool to ensure that BioShock is as accessible as it is complex.

The core concept of the guided training is simple: Assume the players are reasonably intelligent, and catch them when they fall. Backing this up is a system that aims to accomplish the impossible task of shipping the developers along with the game. Essentially, BioShock watches you play like a friend looking over your shoulder. If you're using armor piercing bullets on an Aggressor, you won't do much damage compared to anti-personnel ammo. In this case, the game might offer a helpful reminder on how the different ammunitions function. If you understand how the ammo works and use it effectively, you might never hear a peep on the subject. Of course, if you'd rather brave it alone, you can turn off the guided training entirely. The main purpose is simply not to leave players to muddle through the mechanics alone, while not intruding on the experience for those who pick it up quickly.

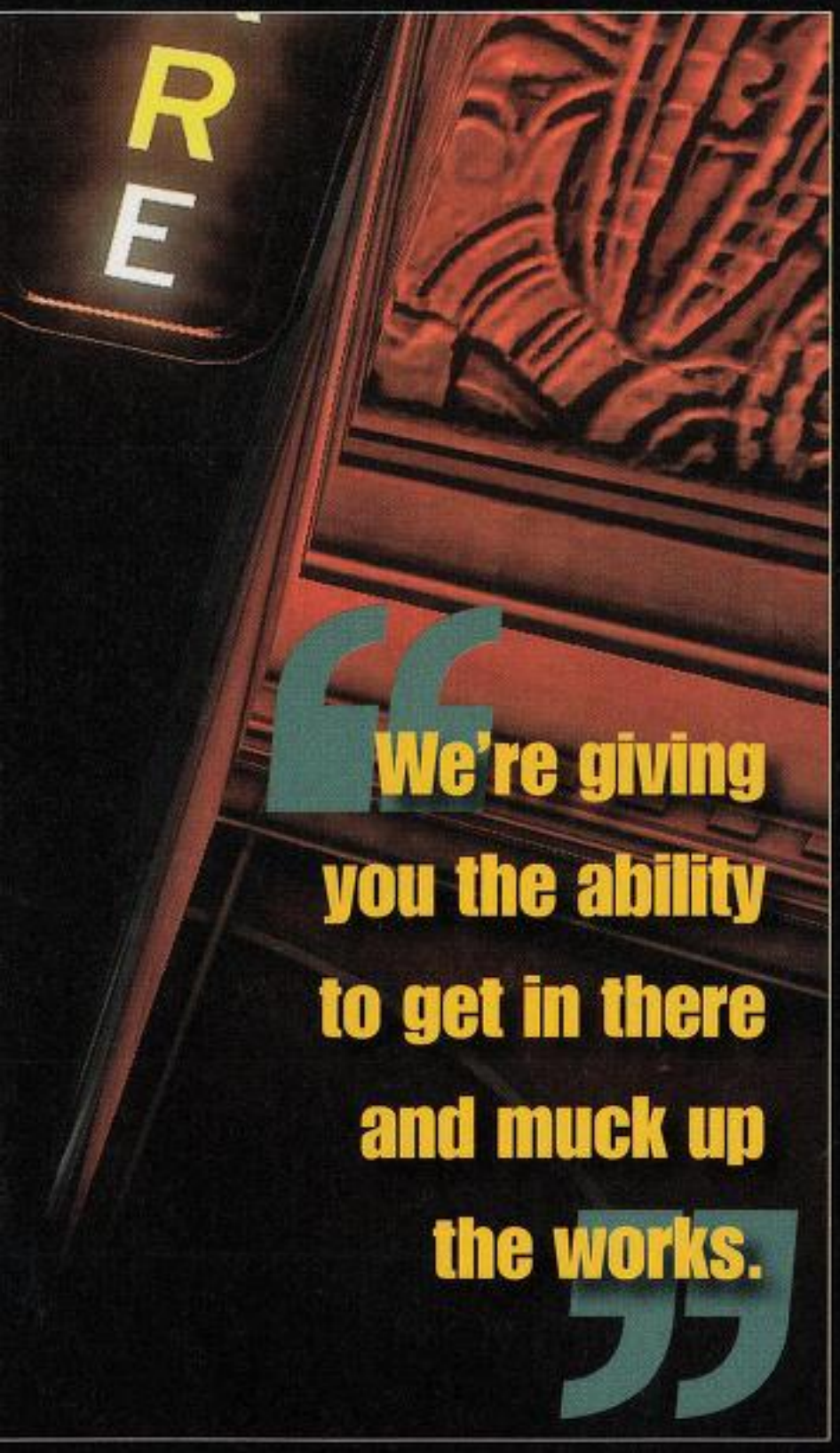
"Here's what I hate," Levine elaborates. "You start up a game, and the first thing you hear is, 'Alright, Marine! We're gonna teach you how to walk!' And you're like, 'Aw, f---, man. I know how to walk.' We will assume that the player is competent from the start, and then we'll watch. If they aren't competent, we'll give a little help. And if they're really incompetent... 'Alright, Marine!'"

Even with the guided training, the game won't hold your hand through every nook and cranny. "BioShock has mysteries, and we're not going to spell them all out for you," confesses Levine. "We trust the player to be smarter than that." In fact, it is this faith in the player's abilities that promises to set BioShock apart, though that statement doesn't reflect well on the industry as a whole. Whether you have a Gatherer in your sights or are deciding which faction to trust, Irrational is trusting the players to pick up the clues and unravel the context of the world of Rapture.

This more subtle approach to storytelling will be familiar to fans of System Shock 2, but perhaps not with the console gaming mainstream. "It's not about big cutscenes that explain everything. It's about piecing together what happened," Levine tells us. You will find letters and personnel files relating to various characters, and when you encounter them later in the game, you won't be clubbed over the head with "This is the character we were talking about before! Remember? Eh?" It is a slow onion peel, gradually revealing more of the Rapture's backstory, its decline, and what keeps it operational. This is accomplished through communications, imagery, and combat. If you aren't paying attention to the clues, you may have a difficult time escaping the doomed paradise with your life.

With its twisted premise and so many ways in which it immerses you in the world of Rapture, we can't help but admit that we were quite impressed with BioShock. Apparently, others are having similar experiences; shortly after we were first shown the game, it was announced that Take 2 Interactive, the parent company of Rockstar and Firaxis, had purchased Irrational Games – a testament to the talent behind BioShock and its amazing potential to redefine the notion of empowering the player.

For the moment, only Xbox 360 and PC owners will be able to enjoy this freedom as they explore Irrational's compelling and poignant world. When we



asked about PS3, however, the team skirted the issue in a way that sounded suspiciously like they hadn't received official approval from Sony of America, though they did express an interest in working with the upcoming console. While the forecast looks promising for the PS3, BioShock is still about year away. Right now, the team is primarily focused simply on building the immersive and visceral experience that will bring the forgotten paradise of Rapture to life.

Weaving together the mysteries of a ruined civilizations and the intricacies of choice, the team at Irrational definitely has the experience and track record to back up its claim to take player-driven gameplay to the next level with BioShock. The setting, for all of its philosophical overtones, exists to create a context for your actions, allowing you to witness how your decisions are impacting the fractured society and its people. "At the end of the day, we're going for this emotional experience," clarifies Levine. "It comes through in the visuals, the music, and the sound. It's a lost world, and it feels vaguely nostalgic and sad. Everyone in Rapture could have been great if things had worked out." Be that as it may, your job isn't to rectify the tragedy brought on by Andrew Ryan's hubris. The ideals that gave rise to Rapture were not of pity, nor of charity. Your main concern, using weapons, the environment, and your wits, is to escape. If you need to kill those who failed at their chance to achieve greatness on your way to that goal, that may just be the price that needs to be paid. ■■■

Another Kind of In-Game Advertising

In addition to towering statues glorifying the triumph of the human spirit, you will also notice monuments to rampant commercialism as you explore Rapture. Adorning the walls, you will see advertisements for numerous products and services, from cigarettes to funeral homes, in both high-end and budget varieties. Though they appear to embody the idealistic design sensibilities of the 1950s, the not-so-veiled satirical tone in these examples makes it clear that the posters will be a steady source of amusement as you explore the world.

"MASTERPIECE"

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"**It's one of those rare games that comes along every five or ten years,** sucks you in, knocks your socks off, and haunts you for years after you've played it."

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"One of the most playable, thought-provoking, and just downright impressive games to emerge on a home console since, well, ever. **Easily one of the best games of the year.**"

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"**It's ingenious, enthralling, and a masterpiece of the most epic proportions.** So without further delay, would you kindly enter Rapture so that you too can experience the best that video games have to offer?"

- Game Informer

10 out of 10 - Game Informer / **10 out of 10** - Wired.com

5 out of 5 - Yahoo!® Games / **5 out of 5** - GamePro

"I spend my career, and my gaming life, **waiting for a moment when a game just astonishes me,** when I can't believe what I'm seeing, what I'm doing. BioShock has five. An instant classic."

- PC Gamer UK

"**More so than any other game in recent memory, BioShock is dripping with atmosphere and intrigue,** and it's one of those rare titles where story, dialogue and character development are just as important as the action sequences."

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